

P.48

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# Reagan on Downed Plane: Like Lincoln Brigade

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 8 — President Reagan strongly suggested today that he approved of efforts by private American citizens to help Nicaraguan insurgents fighting the Sandinista Government, including those Americans who sent in a cargo plane that was shot down on Sunday.

But Administration officials disclosed that the Federal Bureau of Investigation had opened what was described as a "preliminary investigation" of those private activities as possible violation of American neutrality laws.

Even so, President Reagan compared the efforts of private citizens at this time to those of Americans who joined the Abraham Lincoln Brigade in the 1930's to fight alongside Spanish Republican soldiers against Franco and his rightist insurgents.

## 'We've Been Aware'

Referring to the Nicaraguan insurgents by their popular name, *contras*, the President said that "we've been aware that there are private groups and private citizens that have been trying to help the *contras* to that extent."

"But we did not know the exact particulars of what they're doing," he said.

Before leaving on a campaign visit to North Carolina, Mr. Reagan was asked whether he approved of efforts by private American citizens to help the *contras*. "We're in a free country where private citizens have a great many freedoms," he replied.

The President and other senior Administration officials repeated denials that the American-built C-123 cargo plane that was shot down was on a United States Government mission. But Mr. Reagan said he did not know whether it had been privately sent by a retired Army major general, John K. Singlaub, as reported Tuesday by Administration officials.

In Phoenix, a spokesman for General Singlaub at the headquarters of the organization he leads, the United States Council for World Freedom, denied today that the general had been involved in the operation.

"The plane that was shot down was not purchased by and it was not operated by General Singlaub, and the men on it were not on our payroll," the spokesman said. "The Administration had their facts wrong. We only transport medical and nonmilitary supplies to Central America."

Senator Patrick J. Leahy, Democrat of Vermont, the deputy chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, expressed skepticism about the Administration's position. He said in a broadcast interview that the Administration might be encouraging private operations "with a wink and a shrug."

## Link to Southern Air Seen

Meanwhile, evidence emerged today that linked the C-123 to Southern Air Transport, a charter airline with offices in San Antonio and Miami that was owned by the Central Intelligence Agency from 1960 to 1973. The agency then sold the airline to a private investor, but an Administration official said it had continued to fly covert missions for the agency.

C.I.A. spokesmen have emphatically denied any connection with the plane shot down over Nicaragua.

An Federal Aviation Administration official said the plane was owned by Doan Helicopter Inc. of Daytona Beach, Fla.,

ABC News tonight broadcast footage shot a year ago of a C-123 aircraft bearing the same identification number as that on the downed aircraft. The plane was parked in space owned by Southern Air Transport, ABC said.

On Tuesday a company spokesman, William Kress, denied any connection with the plane. Today, he issued a statement acknowledging that one of the Americans killed in the crash, Wallace Blaine Sawyer, had been a pilot for Southern Air until 1985. He also said that Southern Air had done maintenance on the plane.

Another of the dead Americans, William J. Cooper, was found with a Southern Air identity card.

## 'Hero and a Patriot'

Wallace Blaine Sawyer Sr., the father of one of the dead Americans, said today that his son was a "hero and a patriot" who had served in the Air Force during the Vietnam War. He said that his son's frequent trips had aroused speculation in his home of Magnolia, Ark., that he worked for the C.I.A.

"I asked him about it, and he said he was not," said Mr. Sawyer.

The third person killed in the crash was identified today as a member of the *contra* forces by a Washington spokesman for the United Nicaraguan Opposition. The spokesman said he did not know the name of the crewman.

The fourth person aboard the plane was another American, Eugene Hasenfus, a former parachute rigger in the Marine Corps. He was captured by Sandinista soldiers after parachuting from the stricken plane and hiding out for about 24 hours.

President Reagan, asked by reporters whether the plane loaded with ammunition, weapons and boots for delivery to the insurgents had any connection with the United States Government, replied, "Absolutely none."

On his attitude toward the mission, Mr. Reagan said, "Some years ago, many of you spoke approvingly of something called the Abraham Lincoln Brigade in the Spanish Civil War."

That unit figured in the Hemingway novel "For Whom the Bell Tolls."

Senator Leahy, interviewed on the CBS News morning news program, said, "I accept their denials that this man captured or the people killed are not C.I.A. agents, were not working for the C.I.A., were not working for the American Government and were not working for the Department of Defense."

"It's not a violation of our law for people to go down there on their own," he said. "But I think it is a violation of our law if the Administration is allowing it, if it's being done with a wink and a shrug."